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Cindy's Chance

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"To-morrer, Tige! to-morrer!"

The words were scarcely more than a whisper, and the grizzled old dog to whom they were addressed recognized in them nothing more important than his own name, but to the girl they held such a weight of meaning that there was a blending of awe and incredulity in her tone, and she repeated the one word as if trying to convince herself—"On'y to-morrer!"

She stood in the rude porch of a little Tennessee cabin on the mountain side—the weather-beaten logs with their greenish-gray tint nestling so closely against a sheltering ledge that the whole structure resembled a huge lichen. Through the open door—open always, summer and winter, save when some mountain storm swept down—flashed the light of ruddy flames in the wide fireplace. That was the one spot of brightness and beauty in the bare room; the one suggestion of bounteousness where all else was painfully meager. Before the uneven hearth sat an old woman, her face hidden in a sunbonnet as she bent over her bit of coarse knitting, or turned to stir the contents of a kettle slowly cooking beside the fire. The dark rafters over her head were decorated with bunches of drying herbs and two or three pieces of smoked meat. A cupboard of primitive design and exceedingly limited capacity was built against the wall. Opposite it stood a table of

equally rude construction. These, with two or three chairs and a bench, completed the furnishing of the room.

But whatever straitness and poverty were within the little home there was lavish beauty without on that October afternoon. The mountain side was all aglow with autumn's gorgeous coloring —russet and scarlet, crimson and gold, broken here and there by the dark green of the pines. Further away were rugged mountain tops, softened now by the delicate haze that hung over them, and down through the valley flashed the narrow river. The girl's eyes wandered over the scene absently, it was all familiar to her, and she could not have told that she liked it for any other reason. She, too, wore the inevitable sunbonnet but she had pushed it back as if for freer breath and wider vision. Her face was sunburned, her dress scant; her hands large and toil-hardened, told their own story, but her brown eyes had a dumb wistfulness in their gaze not unlike those of the dog at her side.

"Mos' sun-settin', Cindy," said the old woman at the hearth.

The sun was still high enough to be flooding all the hill-tops with light, but down in the valley the shadows were beginning to interlace. The girl slowly noted this and assented with a monosyllable.

"Ya-as."

"Yer don't see Tim a commin'?"

The brown eyes followed the narrow winding road until it was lost among the trees, but with no thought of seeing either the person mentioned or anyone else at that hour.

"He couldn't noways be comin' so early, Granny"—she began. Then divining that the question was born not of expectation but of unrest—the strange fever that was in her own veins that day—she turned and entered the cabin. Standing by the fireplace, her eyes fixed upon the flames instead of upon the face opposite her, she fingered the folds of her coarse apron nervously. But when she spoke the words were slow.

"'Taint noways sure he kin do it, Granny, I 'low 'taint sure—"

"An' *I* 'low," interposed the old woman with a decisive nod of her bonneted head, "that it do be sure. Ef so be 'taint this week—we uns can't allers calc'late fur sartin, Cindy—why it mought be nex' week. Yer bound ter hev yer chance, Cindy."

There was little need of explaining to the girl the uncertainty of human calculations; that was the one thing life had taught her, even though all hopes and plans had been on so low a plane, and ambition almost unknown. Backward through her fifteen years of experience—of work in the fields, berry-picking in tangled thickets, taking care of the poorly fed cow and overworked mule that Uncle Tim denominated "stawk," going on long tramps to the village with pitiful little stores of "projuce"—through it all she could scarcely remember a fall when the verdict concerning the crops had not been "skurcer'n we 'lowed they oughter," nor a winter when the stock had not been, as Granny expressed it, "powerful likely to die on our han's." Monotonously alike the years had been! Still farther back, in the mists of her earliest childhood, Cindy could dimly recall her

mother—only a thin figure wrapped in a faded shawl sitting beside the fire, a sallow face, hollow eyes, and a cough that racked the feeble frame day and night though Granny brewed all the herbs from the rafters. Then, one day, a straggling little procession had wound down the mountain side, carrying a long box. Cindy could remember that she had started after it from the cabin door in round-eyed wonder, and had only been restrained from following by the strong grasp of a neighbor from "up the mounting," who inquired sternly if she "didn't sense 'twas her maw's funeral?"

These two pictures, so vague that she scarcely knew whether they were memory or dreams, were all that remained to her of her mother, except a little worn black book which no one in the cabin could read, but which Granny once assured her that her mother was "mighty sot on." But if motherhood was to Cindy only a fading memory, fatherhood meant something more tangible and infinitely worse—an evil, besotted presence, at the mere thought of which she shuddered. Through what wretchedness of want and wandering the man had dragged his wife and child before they returned to the cabin could only be conjectured. He left them there to be cared for as might happen by his mother and young brother, and himself plunged into a wilder, madder life than before. Cindy had seldom seen him since. His visits fortunately were rare and brief, but they were occasions of terror, for he only came when under the influence of some prolonged debauch, and with the purpose of robbing the poor little place of something it could illy spare. Once, for two or three

dreadful days he hung about in the vicinity of the cabin—in hiding they surmised for some deed that might provoke the vengeance of law. But it was long now since they had seen or heard from him—so long that Cindy began to hope he had either been killed, arrested or at least driven out of the country in a raid—of which rumors had reached them—on an illicit distillery back in the mountains. Does the wish sound horrible? The fear that it might not be realized seemed much more horrible to this daughter who had awakened many a night trembling lest some sound might be her father's step; for there was always a fear that he might do as he had once threatened when they offered them resistance—take her away.

But it was not of him she was thinking this golden afternoon. A new hope had come into her life, a project which, now that it seemed passing from a dream into active fulfillment, appeared to her so stupendous that it awed and bewildered her. It began months before, when two young ladies, an unaccustomed sight on that lonely road, had paused at the little porch to rest, and talked of books and a life so unlike this of the mountains that it might have belonged to another planet.

Or did it begin that day when Granny, down in the village first heard of the school for poor girls? However it happened, it was Granny who had first formed the purpose.

"Ef so be thar's chances, Cindy shall hev one. I give my word to her maw, an' I aint a goin' back on it," she said emphatically.

Uncle Tim, dull, plodding, incapable, but good-natured, was of the same mind; but the gathering of the few dollars on which Granny felt success de-

pended was an arduous undertaking. "Cindy ain't a goin' jes' empty-handed, 'cause it don't stan' to reason that bein' as some kin pay all thar way, as I've heerd they do, that them as has nothin' kin hev much chance," she argued.

So all the summer there had been the slow saving—so slow, when there never was enough for bare necessities! Then a brilliant thought had occurred to Uncle Tim.

"I reckon I mought sell the mule," he said, suddenly looking up from his pipe. "I jedge the work'n' him's 'bout done fur this fall. He ain't much 'count noways; he's powerful old, an' we ain't got no luck a keepin' critters in winter. I 'low I'd better sell him—ef I kin."

That the latter clause was eminently pertinent would have been conceded by any unprejudiced observer as the poor animal was led down the road the next morning. Nevertheless it was upon this sale that the two at the fireside were basing their plans.

"Git out that thar stockin', Cindy, an' let's see once't more how much thar is," said the old woman. And as the girl brought the little hoard from its hiding place and dropped it into her lap, the gnarled, brown fingers grasped it eagerly. "Took mighty hard work to git it," she added. "Someways yer maw warn't never jes' like we uns. Not as she wor sot up—bein' Dan's wife I jedge she hadn't no call ter be, but she could read that book jes' as easy 'thout no spellin', an' some nights I'd hear her a sayin' words out'n it. She'd soft like ways, an' I seen she was worried 'bout leavin' ye, so I tells her Granny'll take keer of ye. Then she 'lowed she didn't want ye brung up jes'

this-a-way, like folks here about, and I says to her: 'Ef thar's any chances, Cindy shall hev 'em;' kinder cheered her up, that did, an' whilst she was a dyin' she said"—Granny lowered her voice impressively and fixed her eyes upon Cindy—"'the Lord will pervide.' That's plumb the words she said. So I've allus been a watchin'."

A shadow darkened the porch, and Cindy uttered a startled cry.

"Thar's dad!"

Quick as thought Granny slipped the little bag of precious savings into her knitting, and as she sprang to her feet, dexterously tossed the whole into a corner of the wide fireplace where, though plentifully sprinkled with ashes, it was safe from the flames.

"Ye hain't no call ter start me till I drop my work inter the fire, Dan Sloan," she said severely. "What hev yer come fur now?"

An imprecation on her work and the place in general, with the unnecessary statement that he had come for money or something with which "to turn the luck," was his answer.

"An this yere's a good place to come for that, Dan Sloan," she retorted scornfully. "A woman what has sech a son as ye air to take keer of her is like to hev a powerful heap o' money. Jes' help yerself."

That he was sure to do she knew, and as he passed into the inner room, she darted a significant glance at Cindy, who, pallid and speechless, had edged her way to the door. The girl understood the look and fled.

The flight of the girl, however, attracted no attention. Meanwhile a stream of mutterings,

threats and profanity accompanied the search of the intruder through the few articles the room contained, but the old woman, though her limbs were trembling, kept a defiant front and sought to hasten his departure by a suggestive remark.

"It mought be well ye come when Tim ain't yere. He hev said he won't stan' no more sech."

Whether the thought of Tim had any effect or he was in haste to be gone for other reasons, Dan made his search hurridly, and found no booty. Then he surlily demanded food. Hardened wretch though he was, something of mother love stirred in the old woman's heart, and she helped him generously from the scant supply the house afforded.

"I ain't a gredgin' ye a bite to eat, Dan, no, nor I never would if y'd do no worse nor ask fur that," she said.

But he took thanklessly what she offered, and departed as suddenly as he had come. Long after he had gone, Cindy, cautiously reconnoitering, ventured back to the house.

"Oh, Granny!" she panted, breaking into a sob, "did he git it all?"

"He ain't tetched one penny on't," said the old woman in grim triumph, as she brushed the ashes from her knitting. "He upsot and rumpidged everywheres, but he never s'picioned why I was too flustered to pick up my knittin'."

With the same show of outward composure Granny set about preparing the evening meal, but secretly she kept an anxious watch for Tim's coming. If only he had made the sale neither Cindy nor the hard-won treasure should abide longer than daylight in so perilous a place.

The slow step and heavy face told nothing when he came, but Tim was not averse to communicating what he considered a good stroke of business and waited no longer than to light his pipe.

"Wa-al, I shoved him off. The man he 'lowed he warn't wuth much, but most folks 'lowed he warn't wuth nuthin', so bein' this feller reckoned he'd go four dollars onto him, I took it."

Something over seven dollars in all—what a wonderful sum that seemed to Cindy! As it was counted out on the rude table, and she looked from one to the other of the faces bending over it, and remembered how hardly the slow gains had been won, and realized what it might do for these, her heart misgave her.

"You-uns air mighty good ter me. 'Pears like I don't ought ter hev it," she faltered.

But the old woman answered decisively.

"My word war' give ter yer mar'."

That night was a strange one to the mountain girl—its hours of darkness intolerably long, and every familar sound transformed. The rustling of the wind through the leaves became the tread of a marauder's foot, every lonely bird-call a signal whistle, and such brief sleep as came was full of bewildering dreams. But early morning found the little household astir, for there was a long journey to be taken. Uncle Tim sat on the porch and contentedly watched through the curling smoke from his pipe the two who started down the road on their walk of twenty-eight miles. Their luggage was somewhat cumbersome, for though Cindy's wardrobe made a very small bundle, the lunch they carried consisted chiefly of sweet potatoes, which could be roasted and eaten

by the way. It was a provision they viewed with great satisfaction, however, and their appreciation deepened as the long hours of journeying through the crisp air reminded them that their breakfast had been early and meagre. A wild, lonely little dell, with a mountain stream gurgling through it, tempted them at last to stop for their midday meal.

"We've done pow'ful well ter git so fur 'long by this time," said Granny, complacently eyeing the sun to assure herself of the hour, "and I 'low this yer's a good place ter stop. Git some sticks for the fire, Cindy, an' we kin rest a watchin' uf the taters roast."

But this pleasant program was not to be carried out, for, as Cindy bent over the little pile of sticks and leaves she was preparing to light, the old woman's quick ears caught the sound of heavy steps among the leaves, and a rustle of the dry brushes that told of the approach of something or some one. Travelers even on the road were few, and in this secluded nook to which they had turned aside, the prospect of meeting anyone was a surprise.

"Hurry up, can't ye!" exclaimed a rough voice in surly but guarded tones—a voice that made the listener's heart stand still in sudden fear, for it was Dan Sloan's.

Had he seen them? To whom was he speaking? The old woman's face grew ashen in pallor at the thought of both Cindy and the money exposed to his rapacity in that lonely spot. Swiftly, noiselessly, she sprang to the girl's side, laid a warning hand over her mouth, and drew her quickly back among the sheltering bushes. They had barely

time to conceal themselves before Cindy's father and a companion with a face even more marked by dissipation than his, came from the upper side of the little brook and paused where Cindy had stood. A minute later a fire would have betrayed the presence of its former occupants, but the little heap of dry leaves passed unnoticed.

The minutes seemed like hours to the old woman and girl, who scarcely dared to breathe lest they should be discovered. The men drank from the stream and then sat down beside it to discuss some project over which they evidently disagreed. They talked in low tones for the greater part, and only an occasional angry word reached the unwilling listeners. Presently Dan slowly rose to his feet.

"'Taint no use a settin' here all day," he said, as if in sullen yielding to the other's plan. "Come on, an' I'll help if yer bound ter—." He turned as he spoke, and the remainder of the sentence was inaudible.

Long after the retreating steps had died away, the women still crouched in the thicket, not daring to move, and when at last they ventured forth, they paused for no dinner, but avoiding the roads, hastened on their way as rapidly as their stiffened limbs would allow. A toilsome and lonely journey it was for the most part, though there were occasional pauses at friendly cabins, and they spent one night on the way. Evening had fallen when they reached their destination and drew near to the pleasant building with its prettily kept grounds. The brightly lighted windows revealed rooms that, plain as they might appear to more cultured eyes, were like paradise to Cindy. She

caught a glimpse of happy-faced pupils, heard the sweet voice of the teacher, and then the notes of a piano rung out, and many voices joined in a song. The poor girl drew back abashed.

"'Tain't no use Granny. Seech as them won't look at we uns. I can't niver git thar," she whispered.

But the vision had a different effect upon Granny. She suddenly comprehended as never before some of the things that Cindy's mother might have known, might have craved for her child. She shook the restraining hand almost fiercely from her arm, and sounded a summons on the door that brought a speedy answer. They were ushered into the glow of the lights—the loyal-hearted old woman and the hungry-eyed girl—and told very simply their story of hope, sacrifice and need.

It was hard to hear it and read the far longer story of hardship and poverty that they did not tell—to look at them so travel-worn, poor and eager, to tell them what the teacher must at last —that it was all in vain, there was no room.

The old woman gazed blankly into the pitying face before her, then out into the gathering darkness of the night. She fingered nervously the little bag of money that she had thought would be such an irresistible lever—how could it be powerless!

"Why, we uns have got mor'n seven dollars! Ef ye could manage it any ways put her anywhere. Cindy ain't partic'lar," she urged.

The teacher sadly shook her head.

"I am so sorry—so sorry! But we are already greatly overcrowded. You must stay and rest tonight. I wish I could do something more!"

But by morning a score of bright-faced girls had undertaken the problem. They could crowd a *little* more.

They could take turns at the tables; some of them would sleep on the floor. "Only let Cindy stay." And she stayed.

"I am so glad!" said a young lady friend of the teacher's, a visitor at the school for the day. "I could not bear to have her turned away when she had tried so hard, and needs the school so badly!"

"But I am thinking of the next one—and she will be sure to come—just as poor, just as needy, and I *cannot* take her," said the teacher with tearful eyes. "Oh, if those who could help only knew!"

Granny had accomplished her mission, and sturdily turned her steps homeward. Far up on a slope, where she could catch a last glimpse of the school, she turned and looked back at it. She had given the one bit of brightness out of her home, she was going back to loneliness, toil and want, but she thought of none of these things. The wrinkled face under the rim of grey hair was glorified as she murmured:

"Cindy hev got her chance!"

If the pictures of her as she stood there, old and alone, on the desolate hillside, could be flashed into our luxurious homes, would it not stand out in strange contrast? Would not some of our girls, into whose white hands all treasures are lavishly poured, be moved to spare from their abundance enough to give some other girl a "chance?"

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